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Downing of Copter With CIA Agents Reported

Incident Said to Occur at Beginning of Nicaraguan Raid in Honduras

By Alfonso Chardy
Knight-Ridder

A helicopter carrying two employes of the Central Intelligence Agency was shot down last month by Nicaraguan forces who were attacking rebel camps in Honduras, U.S. intelligence sources disclosed yesterday.

The sources said one of the CIA employes, the pilot of the helicopter, was badly injured and later was airlifted out of Honduras for medical treatment in the United States. The sources said that he may lose a leg as a result of his wounds.

The other employe, the copilot, and a Honduran Air Force officer accompanying the "intelligence mission" were unhurt, the sources said. They did not identify the CIA employes, but other officials said they are not Americans and might have been working for the CIA on contract.

State Department spokesman Charles Redman confirmed that a helicopter belonging to Honduras had been shot down and said no Americans were aboard. He also told reporters at the department's daily briefing that there were no casualties.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said the agency would not comment on intelligence matters. A U.S Embassy spokesman in Honduras said he did not "know anything" about the incident but did not deny it.

This is the second time that U.S. officials have reported an armed clash between CIA and Sandinista forces since the agency began covertly organizing and funding the Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras or counterrevolutionaries, in 1981.

U.S. intelligence sources said the episode occurred about eight miles from the Nicaraguan border on March 20, the day the White House began to receive reports from the contras that a sizable force of Nicaraguan soldiers had entered Honduras to attack their camps.

The CIA dispatched the helicopter on an intelligence-gathering mission to verify the contras' claims, the sources said.

"They were on an intelligence mission and were not involved in any military operation or giving the contras any tactical or strategic data to fight off the Sandinistas," one source said.

The distinction is important because congressional restrictions prohibit the CIA from providing the rebels with any military guidance, but allow intelligence collection or intelligence-sharing contacts with the contras.

The sources did not provide details but said that Sandinista ground fire hit the helicopter several times, forcing it to crash-land on a hillside.

The incident occurred about five days before President Reagan ordered U.S. helicopters based in Honduras to transport Honduran soldiers to the Nicaraguan border as a result of the Nicaraguan raid.

Although the raid was not reported by the White House until March 24, U.S. intelligence sources said Sandinista units began crossing into Honduras on March 17. They said the raid began in earnest during the weekend of March 22-23 and continued until March 25.

At the time, administration officials played down rumors in Washington that a CIA helicopter had been shot down, although they never fully denied it. They also said that the only helicopter involved in the action belonged to Honduras and was shot down March 17.

Intelligence sources said that the administration apparently decided not to make an issue of the incident to avoid calling attention to the continuing CIA connection to the contras and giving the Sandinistas another opportunity to denounce agency involvement with the rebels.

CIA assistance to the contras triggered a major controversy in 1984, when the agency's involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and the production of a rebel manual that seemed to sanction assassination of Sandinistas were reported.

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